Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE

BELFAST MONTHLY MAGAZINE.

No. 13.] AUGUST 31, 1809. [Vol. 3.

COMMUNICATIONS, ORIGINAL AND SELECTED.

For the Belfast Monthly Magazine.

ON THE UNACCOUNTABILITY OF GENIUS, AND SOME ERRORS ARISING FROM THAT DOCTRINE.

FLORA has, in your last number, given an interesting account of some particulars relating to Robert Burns and his family: I cannot agree that "he indulged too much in the satirical, and on that account his writings were calculated to injure the cause of religion." No! no! he served the cause of virtue, by exposing to merited ridicule the hypocrisy and cant which with some usurp the name of religion. The cause of genuine religion is aided by the detection of imposture. But poor Burns injured himself, and in this respect I fear his example has injured others, by suffering himself to be drawn with unreflecting heedlessness into the vortex of pleasure. Like most others, he began with pleasure, but by degrees sunk into the abyss of dissipation. On his first coming to Edinburgh he forsook the company of persons of eminence in the literary world, who would gladly have received him on account of his genius, and associated with a number of young men, who rejoiced to have his company for the sake of his convivial talents. Some of them were, indeed, of high birth, but far inferior to him in genius, and not superior to him in prudence. Among such companions he acquired many unreal wants, and habits of extravagance unsuited to the simple Ayrshire ploughman and bard, by which he involved himself in inextricable difficulties, sometimes bartered his independence, and often subjected himself to the most poignant feelings of self-reproach, that salutary, though severe monitor, and corrector of our passions.

Thus, indeed, his example did mischief, and many under the authority of his example have excused themselves in their excesses, on the plea of the privilege of genius. The unhappy Dermody was another example of dissipation and profligacy being attempted to be connected and identified with genius.

This plea of the *unaccountability of genius*, and its exemption from the rules of prudence and propriety, has passed too generally unexamined, and become too readily an admitted excuse for irregularity; but surely without reason. Let us not hastily conclude, because a few, like comets, widely deviating from the system, have, as a palliation for their errors, endeavoured to fix as an axiom, that genius and dissipation are almost inseparably connected; or, because some of their readers, fascinated by the beauties of their productions, have, for a time, forgotten the distinctions of right and wrong, and lost the turpitude of the man in the brilliancy of the poet, that therefore genius is exempted from those laws of strict morality by which all are bound, and from which none can depart without injury to themselves and to the community, as affected by their example. Milton was a poet, and possessed genius of the highest order, and yet he was a man of regularity and virtue. In other lines requiring genius, as much, with all due deference be it spoken, as the poet, the names of John Locke, and Sir Isaac Newton stand recorded as the friends of order. They claimed no privilege from genius for acts of vice; and shall Chatterton, Burns, and Dermody, and others of their school, be allowed to reverse the immutable laws of virtue and morality, and trample on them

uncensured? I fear their pernicious examples, have had an injurious tendency. Doubtless they injured themselves: and some are in danger of unwittingly breaking down the fences of morality, by making, in the plenitude of their charity, too great allowances for their defects, and require to be called back to re-consider the verdict of acquittal, which they have been too ready to pronounce. With every proper allowance for the failings of others, the strict laws of justice compel us to denominate actions as they are. Let us pity the offenders, but for the sake of salutary prevention to others, let us brand the offence as it merits, and no longer suffer that axiom of relaxed morality to be pleaded, that genius palliates the enormity of vice. Burns, debased into the drunken exciseman, and Dermody, "earth-enamoured, grovelling with the worm," are objects entitled to our commiseration, but not to that allowance which would mask the unseemly features of vice with something like the semblance of virtue, or reconcile us to error, because it is accompanied with genius. Vice is really more hideous, when it is unhappily blended with such qualities, as render the contrast more striking.

While I am on the subject of Burns, I am led to make some remarks on the danger of introducing persons into a sphere of life different from that to which they have been accustomed. I admit that the distinctions of rank are imaginary; but while they have such influence in common estimation, their ideal consequence has a most intoxicating effect on ardent minds, who have been suddenly raised, and who fondly embrace the fatal doctrine of the unaccountability of genius. Robert Bloomfield certainly possesses very pleasing poetical talents, but I have not heard of his eccentricities. I trust he is not a dupe to this deceptive doctrine, but that, happily for himself, he will long continue the honest and industrious shoemaker of London, honourable in his useful profession, and employing only his leisure hours in commerce with the muses. How happy would it have been for Burns, if his injudicious friends had never taken him from a *home* in Ayrshire, as in his future ramblings he never had the happiness to find *another*, or vitiated his taste for the simple pleasures of nature, by seducing him to partake of the intoxicating and debasing enjoyments of Edinburgh, and the reveiries of the Caledonian hunt. Burns had afterwards many dwelling-places, but appears never to have enjoyed those sweet domestic comforts, which enter into the delightful sensations of which *home* is composed. To enjoy them in their full perfection, the mind must be simple and pure: the relish for them is lost by indulging in those false and artificial pleasures, which leave behind them a permanent taint. Burns feebly directed his agricultural engagements at Ellisland, but his mind hovered over the departed joys of which he had partaken among his former dissipated companions, who used his wit as a relish to their drunken frolics, and their soulless debaucheries. He miserably prostituted his genius, and unhappily acquired a propensity to indulge in such grovelling pleasures. When he was not possessing them, he was dejected and spiritless, and when he could snatch at them, the inordinate stimulus brought on a premature debility, and the wasting of his bodily and mental powers.

Let the mistaken advocates for good fellowship and convivial mirth, examine the condition of the last days of Burns: will they then venture to assert that true happiness consists in noisy compotations?——From his example also it may be seen, that every flower will not bear transplanting. The mountain daisy will soon lose its beauty in the unfriendly air of the crowded city. K.

For the Belfast Magazine.

AS the present age seems to feel very considerable interest in old English literature, I should think that the following account of a once celebrated satirical tract may gratify the taste of many of your readers. The book is entitled *Niobe; or, Age of Tears.* The Author is Stafford. It was printed by Humphry Lownes, 1611. It is very scarce.

This excellent and sincerely-written treatise was published in the reign of